

SPORTS

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JUSTIN WAN, JOURNAL STAR FILE PHOTO

Lincoln East head coach John Gingery talks with Raheem Popoola during a football practice on Aug. 10 at Seacrest Field.

PREP FOOTBALL

Gingery leaves legacy with many

John Gingery thinks this is his 40th year. Or maybe it's No. 41. Wait, no. It's Year 43. Maybe.

Truth be told, the longtime Lincoln East head coach and educator isn't really sure. The precise number depends on what exactly you're counting. The years run together after a while.

One thing's for certain, though: he's been at Lincoln East for the

better part of 50 years.

Rumors swirled that 2022 would be his last, but here he is — with his famed clipboard and bucket hat in tow — at Seacrest Field once again, guiding the opening day of football practice for the Spartans.

"I've been year-to-year for a while now," Gingery told the Journal Star. "I may know during the season. Maybe my body's gonna tell me, 'It's time. You gotta make some changes.' I'll see how football and track go. That's all going to weigh into it."

"I still love what I do. I think I still have an impact. And when I

don't have an impact and when I'm dead weight, you will see me skateboarding someplace, riding a Harley, doing cannonballs at the swimming pool with my grandkids."

'GREW UP HERE'

These red-brick halls have been home for Gingery since the early 1970s.

Though East also housed a middle school in those days, Gingery went to Culler for junior high before becoming a Spartan.

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HUSKER FOOTBALL

Osborne's 'cautiously optimistic'

Legendary Husker coach praises Rhule at Big Red Brunch

BRENDAN PREISMAN
Omaha World-Herald

GRETNA — When Tom Osborne talks, people listen. Especially when it's about the football program he guided to three national championships and over 250 wins.

At the Big Red Brunch, an Omaha World-Herald/93.7 The Ticket event, fans gathered to hear the legendary Nebraska coach speak about his charity, college football realignment and memories from his tenure. But the main takeaways came when he started talking about Matt Rhule, who hopes to get the program to the lofty heights Osborne once did.

"Matt is a very hard worker, we know that. And he's a great communicator, and I think he's trying to set a culture where they're very physical, very tough," Osborne says. "I like what he's done, so, hopefully, they'll have a good year."

With only a week until the season kicks off against Minnesota, Osborne knows that Rhule is ready to go. However, that doesn't mean either man is completely nerve-free.

"I'm sure Matt's somewhat confident but also a little edgy at this point," Osborne says. "I guess I'm cautiously optimistic. I don't want to put any pressure on Matt."

Nebraska Athletic Director Trev Alberts also spoke at the Big Red Brunch. Alberts, with his experience as a Husker linebacker in the 1990s, sees a lot of things he likes so far.

"They are working so hard, they've had a very physical and long and hard fall camp," Alberts said. "I guess what I see is a team that's 100% committed. Frankly, there were some that weren't, or weren't. They're not here anymore."

However, Alberts knows that the task ahead of Rhule isn't easy. Despite the buy-in from

Please see **FOOTBALL**, Page C3

HUSKER VOLLEYBALL



EILEEN T. MESLAR, THE WORLD-HERALD

Susan and Kurt Batenhorst (center), Ally Batenhorst's parents, watch the NCAA volleyball regional semifinal match against Oregon at the KFC Yum! Center in Louisville on Dec. 14, 2022.

Same place, same time

Batenhorst family heads to Lincoln for special match

BRENT C. WAGNER
Lincoln Journal Star

This weekend, when Susan and Kurt Batenhorst head out for their weekly routine of watching one of their daughters play college volleyball, they won't have to make sure their phones are charged.

That will be a change. Oftentimes, the Batenhorsts attended one college match and watched another one (or two) on their phones.

For the next three days, every match they want to see will be right in front of them at the Devaney Sports Center.

Last year was one the family won't soon forget as each of the Batenhorst's three daughters was playing college volleyball. Dani, a senior defensive specialist for Gonzaga; Ally, a sophomore

outside hitter for Nebraska; and Casey a freshman setter for SMU.

This season is slightly less chaotic with just two of the girls playing. And this year, the coaches at SMU and Nebraska worked it out for a special week for the Batenhorst family with SMU invited to play a three-day tournament in Lincoln.

On Friday, SMU plays Lipscomb at 3:30 p.m., and Nebraska takes on Utah State at 6 p.m. The weekend ends when Nebraska and SMU play on Sunday.

And while both Casey and Ally are listed on their team's rosters as being from Houston, there's more to the story. They are the children of Nebraska natives with lots of extended family living within a two-hour drive of Lincoln.

There were 28 T-shirts made for family members that have a photo of Ally and Casey, and more extended family will probably attend at least one of the matches.

Ally Batenhorst isn't officially listed as one of the Nebraskans

STATE TV
VOLLEYBALL FRIDAY
Utah State at Nebraska, 6 p.m.
Radio: 107.3
TV: NPM.

on the roster this season, but she could be. She was born in Omaha. Years later, when it came time to pick her college team, Ally told her dad of Nebraska, "These are my people."

It all lined up last season for a memorable year when Dani decided to play a fifth season at Gonzaga, and that meant there would be one year where all three would be on college teams.

It was a lot for their parents, but they embraced the craziness and did what they could to watch as many matches as they could at an arena, on TV or streaming.

One or both of their parents were at 41 of the 93 matches, in Lincoln; Dallas; Spokane, Washington, or somewhere at a road

match.

"Sometimes she was watching a game on her phone, and I was watching a different game on my phone, and we were attending a Nebraska game at the same time," Kurt Batenhorst said.

This year, Dani has gone from player to sister in the crowd (or online). In April, the schedule worked so Casey and Dani could travel to Nebraska to support their sister during Nebraska's spring match in Central City.

Dani lives in Dallas where she's training to be a financial advisor. On Friday night after work, she's flying to Omaha so she can be at the matches Saturday and Sunday.

Before the season, Susan logs each of the team's schedules in the calendar on the phone and shares it with Kurt and the girls.

"It was the only way that I could keep track of them all," Susan said.

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PREP VOLLEYBALL

Warriors will way to win

Lutheran tops Waverly to extend win streak to 47

NOAH DOUGLAS
Lincoln Journal Star

WAVERLY — The Lincoln Lutheran volleyball team dramatically preserved its winning streak on Thursday in Waverly.

The Class C-2 No. 1 Warriors overcame a 2-1 deficit to beat Class B No. 5 Waverly in five sets (25-23, 23-25, 22-25, 28-26, 16-14) before a loud, amped Vikings gymnasium.

It's Lutheran's 47th consecutive victory.

Sophie Wohlgenuth made the pivotal play in the fifth. The senior pancake-saved a kill attempt, and the ball floated over the net and harmlessly on the back-end of Waverly's side to give Lutheran a 15-14 advantage in a wild fourth set that saw both teams lead.

Match point came on a Waverly hitting error.

And so the streak lives on. The last time the Warriors lost was Oct. 19, 2021. Lutheran lost twice that season, including its season opener to Waverly.

Lutheran has won back-to-

back state championships during its run of wins.

That the teams engaged in such a high-quality match in the season opener speaks to the potential of both squads this fall. Lutheran is the runaway favorite in Class C-2, and Waverly has its sights on breaking into the top tier in a class loaded with top-end talent like Omaha Skutt and Norris.

QR READ: To read the full story from Thursday's match, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link.
NEWSVU



ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE, JOURNAL STAR

Lincoln Lutheran players, including Ava Stroud (middle), celebrate a point against Waverly on Thursday at Waverly High School.

Batenhorst

From C1

They plan out the schedule several weeks in advance. But they can also adjust, like last season when Ally was injured and Casey worked her way into more playing time.

Of course, for all college athletes, there can be many highs and lows during a season, and their parents feel that, too.

“It’s an emotional roller coaster,” Susan said. “In a good way, and sometimes in a heart-wrenching way. When they’re all playing and contributing everyone is on top of the world, but when they’re not, you got to be back backbone for your kids. You’re the one lifting them up. It’s an emotional roller coaster of sorts when you have three kids — not just one — but three of them that you’re trying to support.”

Kurt and Susan have many connections to Nebraska. Kurt grew up in Wisner and came to Lincoln for college where he played basketball at Nebraska Wesleyan. Interestingly, he played summer basketball with Alex Stivrins (Lauren’s dad), and years later their daughters were on the Husker volleyball team together.

Susan graduated from Millard North. After college at UNL, she worked in broadcast news, getting her start at KLNK in Lincoln where she briefly worked as a weather presenter.

She also worked at KMTV and KPTM Fox 42 in Omaha, including as the evening anchor at Fox. It was in that role that Susan likely made mention of the national championship-winning Nebraska volleyball program that her daughter would later play for.

Dani and Ally were each born in Omaha. Kurt manages a natural gas marketing company, and the family has lived in Calgary, Alberta; Chicago, and now Houston for the past 19 years.

Dani got the family started in volleyball on a team at the YMCA, and her sisters followed.

Ally Batenhorst said it was extremely special last year when each played in college.

“It’s kind of unreal for all three of us to have that opportunity,” she said. “We’re super-grateful, and our parents have given us so many opportunities to be in that position to get recruited.”

During the offseason, Ally was with coach John Cook at lunch, and he mentioned that they were trying to get her sister’s team to play in Lincoln.

“I was like, ‘What? You’d do that for us?’” Ally said. “That’s super cool. I know he tries to do that for a lot of us. I’m really glad it worked out, because he was going to get my older sister, and the timing, and COVID, it didn’t work out.”

And the family needs to keep those custom Batenhorst T-shirts because the Huskers are scheduled to travel to Dallas next year to play SMU.

You can imagine how special Ally playing for the Huskers is for her extended family. Her grandparents, Lorin and Jan Batenhorst, live in Wisner and have a granddaughter who plays for the college volleyball team that’s often on TV.

“They’re definitely living their best life with that,” said Kurt of his parents. “You live for moments like that, especially grandkids.

“I think the Norfolk paper finds a way to have Ally on the front page of their sports section. This past week, they had a picture of Ally passing a ball and saying the games are coming up. And of course, my dad took a picture of that and sent it to me. They’re so proud.”

Kurt’s 103-year-old grandfather, Winfred Batenhorst, lives in Beemer and watches the matches on TV. Susan’s parents are John and Joan O’Rourke, now of Bella Vista, Arkansas.

Earlier this month during an event for Husker volleyball boosters, Ally had several people approach her to share a story about her family.

“Of course, everybody knows everybody in Nebraska,” Kurt said. “Ally told me she probably had 20 people come up to her that were either from Wisner, or West Point or Scribner, and they knew me or my parents or somebody. I have 54 first cousins on one side of my family — all in Nebraska.”

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MEET THE 2023 HUSKERS

LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

The 2023 Nebraska volleyball team has eight returners from last season and six new faces. Here’s a closer look at the roster.

2 Bergen Reilly

Setter; 6-1; Fr. **Hometown:** Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Reilly is a three-time South Dakota Gatorade player of the year and led her high school school — O’Gorman — to back-to-back state championships. Last fall, she was a fill-in player for the United States women’s senior national team for one of its second-tier tournaments.

5 Bekka Allick

Middle blocker; 6-4; So. **Hometown:** Lincoln (Waverly).

As a freshman last season, Allick started in 29 of 32 matches and her .326 hitting percentage led the Huskers. She earned second-team All-Big Ten honors.

6 Laney Choboy

Defensive specialist; 5-3; Fr. **Hometown:** Raleigh, North Carolina.

The 2023 national recruiting class had a lot of firepower and great setters, but Choboy’s defense stood enough for her to be considered the No. 8-ranked national recruit by Prepvolleyball.com (and the No. 1 defensive specialist). She was a late addition to Nebraska’s class following a coaching change at Minnesota.

7 Maisie Boesiger

Defensive specialist; 5-6; So. **Hometown:** Firth (Norris).

She appeared in 23 matches as a serving specialist last season. From the Lincoln area, Boesiger was so grateful for the chance to play for the Huskers that she thanked coach John Cook the first time a Husker uniform was waiting for her in the locker room.

8 Lexi Rodriguez

Libero; 5-5; Jr. **Hometown:** Sterling, Illinois.

Rodriguez is the only All-American on Nebraska’s roster, earning first-team honors in 2021 and second team in 2022. She was key in Nebraska having the No. 1-ranked defense in the nation last season.

9 Kennedi Orr

Setter; 6-0; Jr. **Hometown:** Eagan, Minnesota.

Last season, Orr played setter in both a regular offense and



SCOTT BRUHN, NEBRASKA ATHLETICS

The Nebraska volleyball team poses for a photo.

two-setter rotation.

10 Caroline Jurevicius

Right-side hitter; 6-2; Fr. **Hometown:** Chadron, Ohio.

Jurevicius is behind junior Merritt Beason at right-side hitter, but she has probably earned some playing time as one of the Huskers’ most physical blockers and hitters during preseason practice.

11 Hayden Kubik

Outside hitter; 6-2; So. **Hometown:** West Des Moines, Iowa.

She plays at Nebraska’s most difficult position to crack the rotation but put herself in the conversation with a strong showing in preseason practice and the Red-White Scrimmage. She only played in four matches as a freshman but was key in Nebraska’s five-set win against Creighton with six kills, including match point.

13 Merritt Beason

Right-side hitter; 6-4; Jr. **Hometown:** Gardendale, Alabama.

The Florida transfer helped the Gators win a share of the SEC championship last season by averaging 3.5 kills per set with a strong .261 hitting percentage. She’ll be the first letterwinner from Alabama in the 49 years of Husker volleyball.

14 Ally Batenhorst

Outside hitter; 6-5; Jr. **Hometown:** Houston. Batenhorst is one of three Huskers who played in the national championship match as freshmen in 2021, along with Lexi Rodriguez and Lindsay Krause.

15 Andi Jackson

Middle blocker; 6-3; Fr. **Hometown:** Brighton, Colorado.

She came via a recruiting tip from Nebraska All-American Christina Houghtelling, who works at Jackson’s club in Colorado. After that, Jackson kept improving and ended up as the No. 1 middle blocker recruit in the nation (No. 6 overall).

22 Lindsay Krause

Outside hitter; 6-4, Jr.

Hometown: Papillion (Omaha Skutt).

Krause seems on the verge of a breakout season for the Huskers. She had an impressive end to last season and a permanent move to outside hitter. Over the final 12 matches of last season, she had a .359 hitting percentage.

27 Harper Murray

Outside hitter; 6-2; Fr. **Hometown:** Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Murray is the fifth player to join the Huskers after being the Gatorade national player of the year for high school volleyball, along with Ally Batenhorst, Lexi Sun, Mikaela Foecke and Gina Mancuso.

44 Maggie Mendelson

Middle blocker; 6-5; So. **Hometown:** Ogden, Utah.

After playing some right-side hitter last season, Mendelson will probably just play middle blocker this season. She also plays basketball for Nebraska, but it’s in volleyball where she’s previously said she has Olympic aspirations.

Another crack at UW awaits

NU has chance to end drought vs. Badgers at home

BRENT C. WAGNER
Lincoln Journal Star

The Nebraska volleyball team opens its 2023 season Friday against Utah State. Get ready for another season with this season preview, which comes in threes.

Three storylines to watch

Chasing the Badgers: There isn’t usually a lot of grumbling from Nebraska volleyball fans — the Huskers have played in the national championship match three times in the past six seasons. However, there is some frustration these days about at least one thing: the Huskers’ major struggles against Wisconsin. Nebraska has lost 10 straight matches spanning six seasons. Last year, coach John Cook could try to explain the losing streak by saying many of those losses came when Wisconsin had a once-a-generation player in middle blocker Dana

Rettke, along with an All-American setter in Sydney Hilley. But Rettke and Hilley weren’t on the team last season, and Wisconsin still beat the Huskers twice. Even worse, when you lose to the Badgers, that usually keeps you from winning the Big Ten, too. This is a new season and Nebraska’s first chance to end the losing streak is Oct. 21 in Lincoln.

Chasing a regional: Those victory laps around the Devaney Sports Center following a second-round win in the NCAA tournament are awfully special (for the final home game of the year), but can you imagine the scene and sound if that victory lap came after clinching a trip to the NCAA Final Four? In college volleyball, a top-4 national seed is huge because you get to host the second week of the tournament. Lincoln hasn’t hosted a regional since 2016, and that’s a stated goal this season.

The junior class: Nebraska is counting on — and should get a lot — from its talented freshmen class. But this is also the time for Nebraska’s junior class that has

played a lot of matches to take hold of the team, especially in November and December. That class is hitters Lindsay Krause, Ally Batenhorst and Merritt Beason; libero Lexi Rodriguez; and setter Kennedi Orr.

Three numbers to know

.870. Nebraska’s winning percentage since Cook became head coach in 2000, making Nebraska the winningest program in the nation in that span. The next three are Florida (.864), Hawaii (.853) and Penn State (.851).

8,309. The listed seating capacity for the Devaney Sports Center, an increase of 402 from last season after Nebraska added some seats and reworked the standing-room-only section at the top of the arena. Nebraska has led the nation in average attendance for nine straight seasons, including an average of 8,190 last season.

3. The number of Cook’s former assistant coaches he’ll go against during the regular season — Tyler Hildebrand (Long Beach State), Craig Skinner (Kentucky) and Chris Tamas (Illinois).

Three big weeks of the season

Week 4: This will probably be Nebraska’s first chance to see how it stacks up against a top-10 team when the Huskers play at Stanford (preseason No. 3 with first-team All-American right-side hitter Kendall Kipp back) in a Tuesday match on ESPN. Then Nebraska comes back to Lincoln to play another ranked team in Kentucky on a Sunday night.

Week 9: The Huskers get Wisconsin in Lincoln on a Saturday night in the first chance to end the drought.

Week 2: Did you think we would get through this without mention of the stadium match? Nebraska plays Omaha at Memorial Stadium on Wednesday in what may be the largest crowd for a women’s sporting event in U.S. history. The great teams adjust, and if Nebraska can adjust to the conditions of playing a match in a football stadium on a summer night and play well, it will have handled a great first test this season.

Football

From C1

the team, there are still several steps that need to be taken before Nebraska returns to contention.

“We get clouded sometimes because of the previous success, but we’re literally starting over on trying to help our program understand what discipline looks like,” Alberts says. “He (Rhule) is obviously excited. Everybody’s excited, everybody wants to win. But at the end of the day for us, it’s just remaining disciplined.”

Both Osborne and Alberts are fully aware of the rewards good discipline can bring. They are also fully aware of the consequences when that discipline is

lacking. Both men expressed a hope that the football program can return to the fundamentals that made it a national power; namely, a ground attack combined with tough physicality at every position.

“We have some good running backs, and I think they’ll be good. I hope the offensive line will be good,” Osborne said. “I like the three quarterbackbacks, you’ve got three guys there that are good runners and pretty good passers.”

Alberts thinks Rhule has done a good job at re-establishing the culture of physicality. He’s observed a few practices and says the toughness the team showed should carry over when NU steps onto the field for real.

“The games will be the easiest

thing they do. It won’t be practice,” Alberts predicted. “I am confident, cautiously optimistic, that our team is not going to be intimidated by anybody. It will play four quarters, will play together as a team and will fight.”

Osborne had to wait 21 years to finally win his first national championship and did so in a much smaller conference. With realignment running rampant and the Big Ten potentially expanding to 20 teams, Osborne noted that fans should be cautious about judging coaches based on titles — conference or otherwise.

“I hope that people don’t try to measure Matt Rhule or any coach to come on whether they’re winning a conference championship or not,” Osborne says. “It’s going

to be harder, and traveling is going to be a little bit more difficult.”

However, Rhule does seem prepared for whatever the college football landscape throws his way. Alberts says the coach has been very attentive to the program’s history and has worked hard to find the best possible strategy for Nebraska football moving forward.

“He’s been very receptive to listening to Coach Osborne. And he’s reached out to Frank Solich, he’s talked to Bo Pelini trying to learn what works here, what doesn’t work here,” Alberts explained. “It’s been done here before. I’m not saying it’s easy, but Nebraska’s won championships. So, there is a formula to get there.”

COLLEGE FOOTBALL | AWARDS



Ohio State wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. caught 77 passes for 1,263 yards and 14 touchdowns last season.
ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

Can USC’s Williams join Archie Griffin as a repeat Heisman winner?

RALPH D. RUSSO | Associated Press

Here we are again. Just like last year, college football has a returning Heisman Trophy winner — this time, USC quarterback Caleb Williams — trying to join the sport’s most exclusive club: Two-time winners of the most prestigious player of the year award. Ohio State running back Archie Griffin stands alone, winning the Heisman in 1974 and ’75. In 2022, Alabama’s Bryce Young became the 11th returning winner since Griffin to be unable to complete the two-fer, undercut by injuries and a Crimson Tide offense that lacked the type of playmakers he had in 2021. Williams, like Young, won the award with a brilliant sophomore season. Not only did Williams pass for 4,537 yards and 45 touchdowns, but he helped Southern California return to national prominence after several years of mediocrity.

Winning another Heisman is so hard because voters tend to want the player to be even better the next year. That’d be tough for Williams, but he does have this going for him: USC stumbled at the finish and missed making the College Football Playoff in 2022. Williams’ path to joining Griffin is to lead his team at least one step farther. Can he do it?

HEISMAN TROPHY
(most outstanding player)
Top contenders (other than Williams): Brock Bowers, TE, Georgia; Marvin Harrison Jr., WR, Ohio State; Drake Maye, QB, North Carolina; Bo Nix, QB, Oregon; Michael Penix Jr., QB, Washington; Jordan Travis, QB, Florida State.
Long shot: Alabama’s starting quarterback.
And the winner is: Harrison becomes the fifth wide receiver to win the award, but second in the last four years after Alabama’s DeVonta Smith in 2020. Williams will be a finalist.

CHUCK BEDNARIK AWARD
(defensive player of the year)
Top contenders: Harold Perkins, LB, LSU; Jaylan Ford, LB, Texas; Malaki Starks, DB, Georgia; Jeremiah Trotter Jr., LB, Clemson; Dallas Turner, LB, Alabama; Jared Verse, DE, FSU.
Long shot: Leonard Taylor, DT, Miami.
And the winner is: Verse. Do-it-all linebackers and pass rushers tend to scoop up defensive player of the year awards. Verse is a terror off the edge who should get into double-digit sacks.



Florida State defensive lineman Jared Verse collected nine sacks last season.

OUTLAND TROPHY
(best interior lineman)
Top contenders: Joe Alt, OT, Notre Dame; Kelvin Banks Jr., OT, Texas; Cooper Beebe, OG, Kansas State; Olu Fashanu, OT, Penn State; Jer’Zhan Netwon, DL, Illinois; Leonard Taylor, DT, Miami.
Long shot: Maason Smith, DT, LSU.
And the winner is: Banks surpasses future first-round picks in the next NFL draft in Alt and Fashanu to become the most dominant tackle in the country as a sophomore.

DOAK WALKER AWARD
(best running back)
Top contenders: Braelon Allen, Wisconsin; Blake Corum, Michigan; TreVeyon Henderson, Ohio State; Quinshon Judkins, Mississippi; Rocket Sanders, Arkansas; Will Shipley, Clemson.
Long shot: Ja’Quinden Jackson, Utah.
And the winner is: Sanders. No Power Five running back who had at least 200 carries last season had a better yards per attempt than Sanders’ 6.50. Get him another five more carries per game and you can pencil him in for 1,800 yards.

BILETNIKOFF AWARD
(best receiver)
Top contenders: Emeka Egbuka, Ohio State; Marvin Harrison Jr., Ohio State; Malik Nabers, LSU; Rome Odunze, Washington; Dorian Singer, Southern California; Xavier Worthy, Texas.
Long shot: Jimmy Horn, Colorado.
And the winner is: Harrison, of course. No disrespect to former Tennessee star Jalin Hyatt, but Harrison should have won this award last year.



Arkansas’ Raheim “Rocket” Sanders is among the top running backs in the country entering this season.

JIM THORPE AWARD
(best defensive back)
Top contenders: Cooper DeJean, CB, Iowa; Will Johnson, CB, Michigan; Kalen King, CB, Penn State; Kool-aid McKinstry, CB, Alabama; Ben Morrison, CB, Notre Dame; Malaki Starks, S, Georgia.
Long shot: Beau Brade, S, Maryland.
And the winner is: Starks. The versatile sophomore edges out a bunch of lock-down corners.

EXTRA POINTS
Butkus Award (best linebacker): Jeremiah Trotter Jr., Clemson.
Mackey Award (best tight end): Brock Bowers, Georgia.
Groza Award (best kicker): James Turner, Michigan.
Ray Guy (best punter): Kai Kroeger, South Carolina.

Just

From C1

As a high schooler, Gingery participated in basketball, football and track. On the gridiron, he made varsity as a senior in 1974 as a defensive end — helping the Spartans win the 1974 state championship. “It’s been pretty crazy. I kinda grew up here,” Gingery said. “I’ve been here for about 48 years now. That’s a long time.” While in college at Nebraska, he began helping East’s football team in 1976 — notably serving as a faux hypnotist dubbed “The Great Gingeroosky,” complete with a fake mustache and false eyelash get-up, to help boost morale midway through a losing season. “We asked him to hypnotize us and take two plays out of our playbook — interception right and fumble left,” then-coach Lee Zentic told the Journal at the time. “We’ll try anything.” Gingery also served on East’s coaching staff for the Spartans’ most recent state title in 1979. After graduating from Nebraska while studying education, English and physical education, Gingery was a longterm substitute teacher before he was hired in Wymore to teach and coach at Southern from 1983-87. He came back to Lincoln in 1987 to serve as East’s varsity defensive coordinator, sophomore team head coach and physical education teacher. Three years later, he took over for Bob Fehrs as East’s head wrestling coach. In 1995, he succeeded Zentic as East’s head football coach. In 1998, he took the reins from Bob Eyth to helm East’s track and field team. The success East had on the gridiron when Gingery was young hasn’t come to pass since. The Spartans have had 15 losing seasons since 1995, including one 0-8 campaign and four 1-8 years. There have been flashes of success, including a Cinderel-

la-esque run to the semifinals in 2016, though the general trend for the Spartans in the postseason is a one-game appearance. But for the man affectionately known as Ging, winning isn’t the end goal. It’s a nice bonus, absolutely, but his driving force is to make an impact on the lives of East students. “That’s why my dad is so rare,” said Nicole Johnson, Gingery’s daughter and East’s head volleyball coach. “A lot of coaches would tap out because they think winning is everything. “Seeing my dad go through seasons like that taught me a lot about how to run my program and how to be a good coach for this volleyball program. Obviously, I still have a lot to learn, but being able to witness his kids still fight even though they didn’t win a game was pretty incredible.”

‘HOW MUCH HE MEANS TO ME’

It’s been 11 years since I left East. I’ve aged a little, my hair dyed a different shade of red and half-sleeve tattoos inked on both of my upper arms. As I took in East’s first practice of the season at Seacrest, a flood of both positive and painful memories rushed back. The same held true when I walked down the halls a few days later. Full disclosure: Ging was my track coach from 2010-12. I’d been involved in sports for all of my young life, and he remains my favorite coach I’ve had. Listening to him bark instructions in his gruff but calm voice to his receivers on East’s first day of practice transported me back to my high school practices. On that humid, 82-degree day though, with my arm tattoos exposed, it took a second for Gingery to place me. “‘Is this a mom coming out here to yell at me?’” Gingery remembers telling an assistant. “And when you got close, I go,

‘Jiminy Christmas, it’s Amie.’” When I told him I was transferring to Southeast for my senior year it broke my heart. That, to this day, is one of the hardest and most emotional things I’ve ever done. I cried as we walked around East’s track as I told him the news — confiding in him that I’d been assaulted by a classmate, and while it had been reported to both police and the school’s administration, staying at East was far too triggering for me. I needed to leave. He understood. I cried some more. That following season, he still supported and cheered for me — even though I was in black and gold. It meant the world to me. Still does. I know I’m far from the only one he’s impacted. Totalling up the number of athletes he’s coached in football, track, basketball, wrestling and weightlifting paired with the number of students he’s had in the classroom? It’s thousands upon thousands of students who have their stories about Ging.

In 1993, he was nominated for Teacher Recognition Day for going above and beyond in helping an eighth-grade student. In her nomination form, she wrote that Gingery answered her phone call at 1:30 a.m. when she “was scared and didn’t know what to do” about an eating disorder she had been struggling with. “I don’t think he knows how much he means to me,” the student said at the time. Closer to home, he’s the reason why his daughter, Nicole Johnson, pursued education and coaching. Johnson’s memory flashes back to East’s weight room when she was either a junior or senior in high school in 2008 or 2009. This specific weight training class of Gingery’s had several students with physical disabilities enrolled — far before adaptive and unified physical education had been implemented.

“My dad was incredible,” Johnson said. “He had lifts for them to do. He was carrying Harry from machine to machine so he could still do his program. He got the other students involved. It was so much fun. That was a big class that made me want to become an educator myself, just being a part of that.” If Gingery didn’t know in 1993 or 2012 what he meant to his students, that message was received loud and clear in 2019. Oct. 3, 2019. John Gingery lived every parent’s worst nightmare. Travis — John and Kelly’s oldest child — had died the previous weekend after he, 34, had been diagnosed with acute onset liver failure. At 10 a.m. that Thursday, those gathered at Lincoln Berean Church honored Travis, the former all-city and all-state Spartan who had walked on for Nebraska. Later that evening, Lincoln East played Lincoln North Star. Coach Gingery roamed the sidelines in an emotional Spartans win. “I thought he would be going crazy if he knew I was doing something for him and not coaching,” Gingery said. “It was something that Kelly and I talked about. He would have said, ‘Don’t be an idiot. Get out there.’ That was tough. There’s not a day that goes by where I don’t think about him.” Johnson added: “I wish I could have been in that locker room. I heard the energy was just electric. It was just love, empathy and compassion — all of these feelings that high school kids struggle to show sometimes.” In the days and weeks that followed, cards arrived in droves. The Gingerys’ home was inundated with flowers, food and sympathy notes. Coach’s mailbox at the school, too, was overflowing. Friends flew in from around the world. “There were so many people

who reached out,” Gingery said. “It was unbelievable.” Johnson added: “I saw an incredible amount of love and support from our community. It just goes to show the amount of lives that my brother touched and the amount of lives that my dad has touched.” **‘SOMETHING PRETTY SPECIAL’** There’s no telling when Gingery’s going to step away. His heart’s still in it. His mind’s still in it. But his back might make the decision for him. Gingery, 66, had back surgery a year ago. His surgical team pulled out a disc, put in a spacer and fused his vertebrae. He’s dealing with sciatica on his right side. The pain, he admits, is constant and affects his sleep. He’s trying not to let it slow him down, but he knows it does. During the first week of practice, he stepped in to talk through some coaching points but instead of just talking, things ended up getting a bit more physical than recommended. “They ran the ball and two of my guys double-teamed me and blocked me back 10 yards,” Gingery said. “I said, ‘This is not what I should be doing right now because this is killing me every step I take. “The tough part is, you get older and you want to do the things you used to do. From (my head) up, I can still do it. From there down, it doesn’t work as good anymore.” Even though he’s one of the longest-tenured coaches left, he’s still high-energy. He always has been. If he has it his way, he always will be. “If you can leave a footprint on somebody’s heart, a good one, you’ve done something pretty special,” Gingery said. “I think that’s why God’s kept me around here.”